

To The Colors

by
Bill Palmer

When the Air Force Came to Town – Part III



We've been revisiting the Chandler Air Force Station (CAFS), a small radar site that perched on the Buffalo Ridge above Chandler, Minnesota from 1951 to 1969. When the Air Force came to town, it brought a community of Airmen and their families to an existing rural community.

One of the first ways these communities met was in the married Airmen's search for housing. Since there were never enough family quarters at the installation, Air Force families rented all over the region. Chandler's tiny real estate market could not begin to absorb the demand. As Chandler's former postmaster, John DeGreeff, explained, "Everything that was rentable, was rented." So, Air Force families settled in Lake Wilson, Slayton, Pipestone, Edgerton, Leota, Lismore and as far away as Worthington and Luverne.

Living in these towns created many relationships between the Airmen and the local communities. Charlene Steensma grew up in Lake Wilson and recalled that the Air Force coming to town meant a lot of baby-sitting jobs for her and her sister with young Air Force families.

The two communities discovered they made good neighbors. Former Chandler Airman John Sullivan described a classic, small town

relationship with his neighbors in Lismore, "The five years we lived in that house, I never had a key."

Many local businesses went out of their way to help the Airmen. Alvin and Dean Peterson at the Chandler Bank carried Airmen through military pay snafu's. Marv Brouwer's Standard station, and Hoekman's Chandler Café extended credit to the Airmen. Gary Wozniak explained how John Hoekman kept a cigar box with cash behind the counter and offered no-interest loans from it to carry airman until payday. Gary recalled, "He treated us like we were all his sons."

The Airmen began playing on local baseball and basketball teams as soon as the installation opened. Bill Bolin, Slayton High School class of 1953, explained how sports created new relationships, "At first we kind of resented those guys before we got to know anyone - all that changed mainly through baseball . . . over 50 years later I consider them friends." Local newspaper coverage of the CAFS baseball and basketball teams increased their exposure and reminded readers that the Airmen were part of the regional community.

The military and civilian communities also encountered one another in the workplace. An Airman's paycheck of the 1950's and '60's was a sad affair. Many Airmen took extra jobs. Gary Wozniak described the informal labor market at the installation, "In the summertime, invariably every barracks would get a phone call 3-4 times a day from a local farmer wondering if somebody wanted to go do hay, maybe help pick rock, walk beans, detassel corn, load hay, help milk, drive tractor, bale . . . If you wanted an extra job, you could have it."

The only consistent area of tension between the two communities involved Airmen dating local women during the early years. Former Chandler Airman Paul Ward of Edgerton explained the resistance they encountered, “Girls around here were pretty well warned by their parents to stay away.”

Many young local women dated Airmen nevertheless. They found them polite, interesting, and very supportive of one another. Women like Emily Nama, who grew up in rural Chandler, recalled a sense of newness or mystery, “All new uniformed people in our quiet town of Chandler.”

Sometimes parents welcomed Airmen into their homes. They explained their welcome by pointing out the Airmen were someone else’s sons. So they treated the Airmen how they would want their own son received if he were serving in another community.

By the way, Ora Lee Talsma Ward disregarded the warnings to stay away and married Paul.

Air Force children brought a new dimension to the Chandler and Lake Wilson schools. A glance through the Chandler School Annual from 1966 reveals a student population that included eleven African-American students, kids who certainly would not have been there, but for their father’s assignment to CAFS. But diversity means much more than skin color. The Air Force students came from all over the U.S. and brought their different cultural backgrounds and life experiences with them.

John Busman, Chandler High School class of 1965, explained the influence the Air Force students had on his school experience, “It was just interesting . . . kids with different

backgrounds and different accents, it just made Chandler school an interesting place to be those years.”

The Air Force presence in the community not only brought new students to the schools, but also brought new lessons as well. These lessons were not listed in the curriculum, but were every bit as important. They included accepting as a friend and teammate others who appeared or sounded different than you; learning how differences can make a person interesting; and learning that differences among people are not as significant as the many more similarities they share. Finally, the students learned that life consists of change and adjusting to change.

Next week we’ll learn about how these two communities adjusted to the biggest change – when the Air Force left town.

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